

Sermon for the 2nd Sunday after Christmas
Trinity Church, January 4, 2009

Have you ever wondered about the gifts, the ones those Wise Men offered to the Child Jesus? Rich gifts for a modest working family's child. What happened to them? Did they change the standard of living for that holy family? Did they work their way through the global economy so that somehow they are still with us? We don't know. They simply seem to disappear , like those mysterious strangers themselves -- the ones who offered them together with their worship.

The appearance of the wise men as an event in history is obscure. No scholarship seems entirely able to reconcile it. What is not obscure is their part in revealing the truth of the Gospel. What we have in this beautiful, mysterious, magical story is really a parable. It contains a powerful truth that is universal in its meaning, a truth that comes now at a time when its message of comfort and joy is needed more than at any time in most of the years we have known, and for most of us that is many.

The figure who in one way dominates the parable is Herod the king of Judea, and the thing that drives his behavior is fear. We can't see his fear, but it overwhelms the landscape. When Herod is afraid, so is everyone else. No one knows what he is likely to do. He fears the Romans whose puppet he is. They call him "king" but the title holds little power of its own -- only the power to spread anguish among the powerless. Ironically, the one he fears the most is the weakest one of all: a new-born child lying in a manger, somewhere close by.

Remarkable figures appear in Jerusalem, a noble caravan of scholars, astrologers who have seen a star and divined its meaning. Wiser than a lot of men, they stopped to ask for directions. "Where can we find the King of the Jews who is newly born, because we has seen his rising star, and we have come to worship him." And Herod was afraid -- afraid, but also out of fear, deceitful. He tries to con the Wise Men, trick them into telling him how to locate the holy Child. "Tell me where he is, so that I can worship him also."

You can imagine that oily voice and modestly downcast eyes, the very model of humility and religious piety. But the wise men are wise men . They were not taken in by Herod's pious charade. They went to Bethlehem, performed their acts of worship at the manger throne, left their precious and highly symbolic gifts and then disappeared as mysteriously as they had come.

What is powerfully at work in this Christmas story is the confrontation of two moral and spiritual forces that affect every human life, and determine the actions and the attitudes that shape the direction of our lives. They are the fundamental human motivations that in the long run influence the course of history itself. Those powerful forces are, on the one hand, Hope; and on the other, Fear.

Hope and Fear: Herod is fear. Everything he does is a product of his fear. The pilgrimage of the Magi, the Sages, -- the wise men are driven in their pilgrimage by a transcendent hope. In this moral and spiritual parable the wise men are Hope. They represent the hope of all the world -- the world beyond the narrow confines of Judea and Palestine -- so that there in Jerusalem, hope confronted, contended with, and ultimately conquered fear.

We live at a moment when fear dominates the landscape. It comes in all forms and dimensions. There is the fear of a failing economy, that comes to sharp focus when people go hungry, or see the threat of hunger; when they lose a home, or job, or see the very real possibility of that happening. There is the constant abrasion of war that seems never-ending and that strikes homes and communities with anxiety and too many homes with stark grief, not only in America, but all over the world. The agenda of problems is all too familiar. And for us, the privileged, it is revealing for us to examine how much of our own consciousness is devoted to our fears and our efforts to shore up our defenses against the known or unknown threat.

Then there is hope. We are inclined to think of hope as something passive. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Hope is what lies at the root of action, and hope is what keeps us soldiering on in the face of discouragement. Most of you know that last Sunday June and I played hooky from Trinity Church. The time schedule for the day gave me the chance to listen to one of those early morning political discussion programs. The panelists, news people who represented all shades of editorial opinion, were reviewing the agenda of enormous problems that would face a new presidential administration on the twentieth of January.

But there was a surprise. Something remarkable crept into the discussion, something that I had already begun to sense stirring in the mood of our country -- the idea that out of the darkness of our time, we may be witnessing the dawn of something new and exciting. From left and right there began to sound a note of hope. Political analysts who a few months ago were in each others' faces, showed a surprising level of agreement. Someone suggested that it is time for a "reset of our values" and the rest of the panel latched on to the term. Most of us know that on most of our complicated machines there is a little red button somewhere that is labeled "reset" and that when things get messed up we can press the Reset and start

over from scratch. It was the excitement of those men and women, cynics by profession, talking about the possibilities for the reassessment and resetting of the American agenda. They began to talk with excitement, not about political strategies, but about ideals, and that for me was more than a glimmer of hope.

As we reset our values, we may begin to think of community as the responsibility for others' welfare, especially the welfare of the most vulnerable. Martin Luther King, Jr. Said, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. What affects one directly affects all indirectly. Along the same line, we may begin to think of individual achievement in terms of contribution to the common good, not just the accumulation of wealth.

We may start to think of the earth as something to be nurtured and tended for our necessary nourishment and shelter, rather than a resource to be exploited for pleasures and comforts we do not need.

We may think of peace in terms of shared human hopes and mutual responsibility, rather than armed and fortified self-protection.

None of these can be realized by the push of a button, but Hope says that they are real human possibilities.

Hope is rooted in faith. Terry Waite, who as a representative of the Archbishop of Canterbury was taken hostage in Lebanon and held for more than four years in chains, in solitary confinement, having no idea what the future held from hour to hour. In an interview, someone asked what part his faith played in his ability to survive that isolation and fear. He said, "It was my faith that made it possible for me to hope."

Christmas is the celebration of the Incarnation of God in Christ. It is the celebration of hope. Kathleen Norris puts it more simply and practically: "For me, she writes, the Incarnation is the place where hope contends with fear."

And so we come to the end of another Christmas season. We take one last, long look at its wonder and mystery, its gorgeous color and warmth and light; and in faith and hope we carry these precious things on into another year. For us, in these latitudes, the year is at its dark, cold crown. The hidden months that open now in front of us carry their quota of hopes and anxieties; but we carry the assurance of the Gospel. The light shines in the darkness. Hope overcomes fear. We carry those treasured gifts of truth and love, of responsibility and kindness, and the faith that our unavoidable trials are transformed by the all-sufficiency of Christ.